

## **AIJA Conference 21-22 October 2002**

### **Improving Legal Services to Rural and Regional Areas Using Technology**

Someone said "Oh, it's like watching an old B grade movie. They don't like the blurry lines and things. That's because of what they're used to. They're used to something better".

This is the comment of a Site Coordinator for the Women's Justice Network in South-West Queensland. It is a comment about bandwidth, picture quality and familiarity with technology. It is also a comment that indicates increased competence and familiarity with technology does not necessarily mean a person will be positive about videoconferencing. They may in fact be more critical of the technology.

In keeping with the theme of the Technology for Justice Conference, "using technology - what it can do for you", I propose to discuss the experience and lessons learned by Legal Aid Queensland in seeking to provide legal aid services to rural and regional communities using technology. The principle lessons have been learned from our Women's Justice Network project, which saw PC videoconferencing equipment set-up in community agencies to allow access to services available elsewhere around the State. And while videoconferencing has been an important link in our rural and regional strategy, the establishment of our award winning Call Centre and the development of our website have also taught us lessons about the use of technology in delivering improved access to justice in a state that is challenged by distance. We have also pursued innovation in the use of electronic commerce, developing a platform which enables preferred suppliers to electronically lodge applications for legal aid and their accounts.

#### **Call Centre**

For the majority of our clients, the first contact they will make with Legal Aid Queensland is through our award winning call centre by dialling our toll-free 1300 number. 54% of clients make first contact with us this way. Personal visits to our offices are the second most common contact method.

The Call Centre was established in 1996 to improve service to clients by:

- Receiving all enquiry and switch calls state-wide via a toll-free 1300 number;
- Providing legal information and referral to callers; and
- Providing access to immediate telephone legal advice for remote callers or in emergency circumstances.

The strategy behind the establishment of the Call Centre was to improve access to services - particularly for people in remote areas - as required by Legal Aid Queensland's mission to enhance access to justice. It was also seen as a mechanism for achieving efficiencies in the provision of advice and information, in addition to increasing client access to, and improving the accuracy and consistency of, these services.

The Legal Aid Queensland Client Service Centre commenced in October 1997, operating from Monday to Friday, 8.00am to 5.30pm, responding to over 5000 calls per week from clients around Queensland. Located in Brisbane, it is the first point of contact for Legal Aid Queensland across the State, with staff attempting to resolve the majority of client issues at point of contact, delivering a complete service to a large proportion of callers. The service is anonymous and confidential, and is subject to neither means nor merit tests. The Call Centre is staffed by approximately 45 full-time, part-time and casual employees, and has an annual salary and administrative budget of approximately \$2.2m.

The Call Centre ensures:

- Standardised service, through a single point of contact for Legal Aid Queensland state-wide;
- Comprehensive legal information using a single source (a common user database), including access to legal aid guidelines, community referral agencies by location and type, and publications on any given topic; and
- Flexible and efficient information service, supported by a staffing structure and working arrangements which match resources to demand.

With superior client service the focus of all Call Centre activities, the aim is to push the boundaries of what can be achieved for clients at point of contact, rather than simply act as an information service, a referral agency and a switchboard. Call Centre staff are genuinely concerned about their clients, both external and internal, are aware of their responsibilities as the front end of LAQ and are quick to challenge existing policies or procedures which do not produce timely results for clients.

Earlier this year, the Call Centre answered its one millionth phone call – an achievement that highlights the success and community support for this vital service.

### Legal Advice

A client needing legal advice is referred by a Customer Service Officer to our team of legal advice solicitors, either for face-to-face or telephone legal advice. Face-to-face legal advice has been the traditional means of providing legal advice to clients, but with many clients experiencing difficulties in attending a Legal Aid Office – because of transport problems or lack of child care - a need emerged for a new system of legal advice provision to be developed.

Legal Aid Queensland commenced telephone legal advice sessions on a trial basis in October 1999 for clients in the Toowoomba and Caboolture regions with excellent results. In 2000-2001, telephone advice was expanded as an adjunct to the Rural and Regional Strategy, with advice now provided by solicitors to clients in regional areas across the State.

Data from the initial trial of telephone advice services in 1999 clearly showed that telephone legal advice was highly valued by Legal Aid Queensland clients. In particular, clients valued:

- The timeliness of the advice, they could access the advice when they need it;

- The ease of access - this was of particular value to women with young children who otherwise had difficulty accessing services. Statistics show telephone advice clients are more likely to be women (60%) seeking family law advice (50%); and
- The convenience and comfort - clients reported they felt more comfortable discussing difficult personal issues from their own homes, where they felt less pressured and more able to understand what the solicitor told them.

Telephone advice has played an important role in providing access to legal services in regional communities. The community consultation and needs assessment carried out as part of our Rural and Regional Strategy identified a previously unmet need for additional access to legal advice for people in regional communities.

While telephone legal advice provides improved access to services for clients, it is also a strategy to manage the high demand for legal advice on staff. Telephone advice sessions take less time than face-to-face sessions, allowing more clients to receive advice. The decrease in time taken on telephone legal advice is not at the expense of quality or client satisfaction. In a survey, telephone advice clients responded favourably to the statement "the solicitor spent enough time with you to fully understand your situation".

### Website

Legal Aid Queensland is no different to any other justice sector agency in that it has a website [www.legalaid.qld.gov.au](http://www.legalaid.qld.gov.au). The Legal Aid Queensland website contains information about the law, lawyers and the justice system in Queensland. The site contains full details of Legal Aid Queensland's services, history, structure, funding arrangements, policies and office locations. Visitors to the website are able to access the full-range of Legal Aid Queensland publications and can order publications over the internet via an email address or download the material. A comprehensive range of self help kits (17) is available on the website. Also available online is access to our Legal Information Database which provides a range of information on family, civil and criminal law, as well as frequently asked questions and a legal dictionary (the database contains over 180 legal information screens, contact details for over 2000 referral agencies and a glossary of over 1000 legal terms). Also, there is a comprehensive list of links to other organisations of interest.

The website also enables access by preferred supplier legal firms to the electronic lodgment of applications and accounts and the comparable sentences database.

The comparable sentences database contains detailed summaries of the relevant facts of sentences imposed for both adult and juvenile offenders convicted in Queensland courts. Most of the sentences are for indictable offences, but some summary sentences are also recorded. The databases contain almost 11,500 records, including almost all of the sentences considered by the Court of Appeal since its inception in 1999. The databases are constantly updated with new single judge and appeal sentences. The content of these databases is derived from information supplied to Legal Aid Queensland by in-house legal staff and private practitioners.

The comparable sentences databases are intended to be used by legal practitioners on behalf of their clients to obtain the best possible sentence outcome for their client. They enable practitioners to search for a range of comparable sentences which can be presented to the court to demonstrate that a particular sentence is available to their client.

The databases are available to in-house staff and preferred suppliers via the internet free of charge.

A database shortly to be made available to preferred suppliers is the criminal injuries compensation database. It comprises brief summaries of the relevant facts of numerous compensation awards made in recent years. The database currently contains records for almost 2,200 decisions from District Court, Supreme Court and Court of Appeal.

Legal Aid Queensland introduced electronic lodgment in 1996. Preferred suppliers in Queensland lodge applications for legal aid, requests for extensions and invoices electronically through the internet and generally communicate by way of electronic mail.

A subsite of the Legal Aid Queensland website is the Rural and Regional subsite. It provides information about the Farm and Rural Legal Service which provides advice and assistance to Queensland rural producers who have severe debt related problems or are in dispute with their lenders, or are otherwise facing financial hardship which relates to their business of primary production. Two Farm and Rural Legal Service lawyers are situated in the Toowoomba Legal Aid Office and travel to most remote locations to give legal advice. They assist rural producers on the farm, at a venue of the farmer's choice, at a legal aid office or by telephone.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the information provided on our website gives some people the tools they need to resolve their legal questions or problems without them having to contact our call centre or become a client. The resources on the website are also utilised by private practitioners, other government and community agencies and university and school students. The website also provides a valuable mechanism for the general public and clients to provide feedback about Legal Aid Queensland in general and the website in particular.

With Australia now one of the biggest users of Internet technology in the world – and our access to broadband connections increasing and becoming more cost effective – I believe our website will become a more important part of our service provision program in the future.

#### Information Kiosk

Legal Aid Queensland also operates three “touch screen” Information Kiosks. The kiosks provide comprehensive information on legal aid services, child support, domestic violence and basic family law matters. The kiosks also provide blank court forms and instructions on how to complete them and file them in court. When originally developed, the information kiosk also had the facility to complete an Application for Dissolution of Marriage, with instructions on how to file the completed form in the Family Court of Australia.

#### Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing technology is being utilised by Legal Aid Queensland to allow Queenslanders in rural and regional areas, or institutions, to gain access to the law.

Legal Aid Queensland has been utilising videoconferencing technology since 1996, at first delivering outreach advice to the Redcliffe and Charleville Neighbourhood Centres as a trial of the new technology. Since then, Legal Aid Queensland has been using videoconferencing for a range of purposes, including giving rural Queenslanders access to legal advice and providing legal advice services to Queensland's prisons.

The Women's Justice Network, established in 1999, utilised this technology to reach out to rural and Indigenous women living in south-west Queensland. Funded through the Commonwealth Government's Networking the Nation scheme, WJN established sites and trained local workers to be information officers in Blackall, Tambo, Augathella, Windorah, Quilpie, Charleville, Morven, Roma, Mitchell, Thargomindah, Cunnamulla, Dirranbandi, St George, Goondiwindi, Tara, Chinchilla, Miles and Cherbourg. A similar type of operation is the Western Queensland Justice Network based in Mt Isa which uses videoconferencing facilities in nine community organisations throughout Central West Queensland.

Each community site has a PC videoconferencing unit – a personal computer camera set up in a private room. The units are situated in locations that have been identified by the local community as confidential and accessible to women. Each PC videoconferencing unit is connected to the Internet and Legal Aid Queensland's website. The videoconferencing system allows face-to-face communication in situations where distance would usually prevent such communication occurring. For example, a woman in Tambo can go to a site and speak face-to-face and in confidence with a solicitor sitting in Brisbane.

During the 2000-2001 financial year, prisoner's in Queensland's jails received enhanced access to legal assistance, with the extension of videoconferencing facilities to take in Brisbane Women's and Wolston Correctional Centres.

Videoconferencing provides a more effective service for prisoners and prison duty lawyers. When using videoconferencing facilities duty lawyers have resources at their fingertips including access to files, research materials and interpreter services allowing them to more effectively answer any questions asked by the prisoner. Videoconferencing services have been increased from half a day per week to two and a half days per week. The increased services have met with positive feedback from prisoners, duty lawyers and prison staff.

In September 2001, the videoconferencing technology was put to use in a court-room context, to take evidence in a child rape case via video link from a witness in Dublin, Ireland.

Legal Aid Queensland's Maroochydore office was turned into a "virtual court" for the day, with judge and jury, prisoner and police escort, counsel, solicitors, court reporters and court entourage – 23 people in all – from the Maroochydore District Court setting up in the LAQ office conference room. A similar videoconferencing facility in Dublin was used to make a connection to Maroochydore, via Brisbane, with the assistance of a technician in Dublin and Legal Aid Queensland's Information Technology staff. With only a few minor delays, Legal Aid Queensland's virtual courtroom achieved its goal, successfully hearing evidence from the witness in Dublin via the videoconferencing facilities.

Legal Aid Queensland has had two evaluations carried out of the Women's Justice Network - the first in 2000 and the other in May/June 2002. The evaluations are instructive on rural women's awareness of legal issues and their attitude to technology, namely videoconferencing technology.

### **Women's Awareness of Legal Issues**

The 2000 evaluation identified that women in rural communities lack sufficient general knowledge about legal issues and consequently make limited use of legal services. This finding is not that surprising given that few legal services are available to people in remote communities e.g. South-West Queensland.

For example, there is only one solicitor practising in Charleville, servicing the area from Charleville to the South Australian border.

Clients in remote areas have no choice but to travel very considerable distances for face-to-face consultations, which are also very infrequent in availability.

A woman living on a farm who may be involved in a domestic violence situation may have to travel a long way just to get to her nearest small town, but the services available there could be so limited that she would need to travel another four or five hours to a larger centre to find a service that could meet her needs. Even if she does have access to a vehicle, the ability to leave the property and the money to cover travel and accommodation costs, it is possible that the one solicitor in the region may be already acting for the husband or the family. Thus the logistics in accessing information, advice and/or representation can truly be daunting.

In the 2000 survey, 19% of the women indicated they had never consulted a solicitor. In 2002, the percentage reduced to 12% who had never consulted a solicitor. It is also of note that in the 2002 survey, half the women who responded did not answer the questions about their experience with legal problems.

### **Women's Frequency in Accessing Legal Services by Age**

|                             | <b>Up to 30 Yrs</b> | <b>31-50 Yrs</b> | <b>Over 51 Yrs</b> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|
|                             | <b>%</b>            | <b>%</b>         | <b>%</b>           |
|                             | <b>(n=19)</b>       | <b>(n=121)</b>   | <b>(n=93)</b>      |
| Never consulted a solicitor | 28.6                | 39.3             | 32.1               |
| Last 12 months              | 3.9                 | 61.8             | 34.2               |
| 1-2 years ago               | 10.7                | 42.9             | 46.4               |
| 2-5 years ago               | 7.3                 | 56.1             | 36.6               |
| Over 5 years                | 3.3                 | 46.7             | 50                 |
| <b>Total</b>                | <b>8.2</b>          | <b>51.9</b>      | <b>39.9</b>        |

More women indicated that they had experienced problems with civil matters than with either family or criminal matters. However, this result may be skewed by the classification of "physical and or emotional abuse by a partner" as a civil matter. If the 14.8% is added to family matters, then family matters comes in second behind Powers of Attorney/Wills. Problems with banks is high at 19.5%.

|  | YES  |         | NO   |         |
|--|------|---------|------|---------|
|  | %    | (n=149) | %    | (n=151) |
| <b>Family Matters:</b>                       |      |         |      |         |
| Contact & residence of children              | 8.1  | 12      | 92.7 | 140     |
| Child support & maintenance                  | 7.4  | 11      | 92.7 | 140     |
| Property settlement after separation         | 6.7  | 10      | 93.4 | 141     |
| <b>Civil Matters:</b>                        |      |         |      |         |
| Power of Attorney/Wills                      | 25.5 | 38      | 74.8 | 113     |
| Problems with banks                          | 19.5 | 29      | 80.8 | 122     |
| Physical and/or emotional abuse by a partner | 14.8 | 22      | 85.4 | 129     |
| Problems with debts                          | 12.1 | 18      | 88.1 | 133     |
| Motor vehicle accident                       | 10.1 | 15      | 90.1 | 136     |
| Neighbour disputes                           | 10.1 | 15      | 90.1 | 136     |
| Problems with tenancy                        | 7.4  | 11      | 92.7 | 140     |
| Problems with fence disputes                 | 5.4  | 8       | 94.7 | 143     |
| Health rights information                    | 4.0  | 6       | 96.0 | 145     |
| Social security fraud                        | 1.3  | 2       | 98.7 | 149     |
| <b>Criminal Matters:</b>                     |      |         |      |         |
| Court matters                                | 10.1 | 15      | 90.1 | 136     |
| Fines  | 9.4  | 14      | 90.7 | 137     |
| Police charges                               | 2.   | 4       | 97.4 | 147     |
| <b>Other:</b>                                | 16.8 | 25      | 83.4 | 126     |
| *Multiple choice question                    |      |         |      |         |

87% of women surveyed responded that they had accessed legal advice through a private solicitor. Approximately 5% had accessed a solicitor by phoning Legal Aid, 4% had visited a community information centre and only 1% had used Legal Aid Queensland's 1300 number. Four women said they had used other methods to access legal services such as visiting a solicitor in another town.

### **Women's Awareness of WJN**

Legal Aid Queensland has conducted a range of promotional activities to make women aware of the service in South-West Queensland. These activities have ranged from mass communication strategies (i.e. posters, radio and newspaper interviews and a television commercial) to interpersonal communication strategies (i.e. educational workshops and cluster meetings with site coordinators). The 2002 survey asked about awareness of the services and its location in the community. While website hits can be an unreliable indicator, there have been near 6,000 hits to the WJN website in a year.

However, despite the promotional activities, only 20% of women who responded to the survey were aware that Legal Aid Queensland had installed the Women's Justice Network in their town. This level of awareness was comparable to the level identified in the 2000 survey (21%).

Of the women who had known about WJN before the survey, about 30% had heard about the service through contact with a site coordinator, while 25% had learnt about WJN from reading about it in the newspaper. An equal number of women (13.6%) learnt about WJN from seeing a poster in town and hearing about WJN on the radio. A smaller number of women heard

about WJN from a friend or family member (11.4%). Only 4.5% found out about WJN by participating in a workshop or women's meeting in their town.

#### Diffusion of WJN by Community

|                              | <b>Total<br/>%<br/>(n=44)</b> |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Centre Coordinator           | 29.5                          |
| Participated in a workshop   | 4.5                           |
| Saw a poster in town         | 13.6                          |
| A friend/family member       | 11.4                          |
| Read about WJN in newspaper  | 25                            |
| Heard about WJN on the radio | 13.6                          |
| Other                        | 18.2                          |

The results of the survey indicated that the community awareness of WJN was limited, despite numerous efforts to increase the level of awareness. The conclusion reached was that awareness and use were primarily driven by need. One site coordinator explained in response to whether they believed their community knew about the existence of WJN:

“No, the whole community doesn't know about it. But if they need it, they will. When someone wants something, when they've got a problem they will seek ways to solve it. Then they will find out about the videoconferencing”.

#### Accessing Legal Advice

In considering the preference of women for accessing legal advice i.e. videoconferencing compared to face-to-face, the majority of women preferred face-to-face consultations (77.5%) with solicitors to access legal information and advice. The internet and videoconferencing were not high in the order of preference. Only 28% said using their home telephone was a preferred method of accessing legal information.

Videoconferencing is seen as a “safety net for emergencies” - as the last resort rather than the first choice. A reason offered for preference for the phone was:

“A woman can pick up a phone anytime in her home or in the evening sometimes. She can call at a time of her own choosing, a free call number and have complete privacy and no contact. She need not be seen. No-one in her community or family need know. I can't see anyone wanting to exchange that for a much more public forum in some cases”.

It is the experience of solicitors and site coordinators of community centres that clients were more willing to use the videoconferencing as the “second” stage after they had first met with the solicitor face to face.

#### Attitude Towards New Technologies



Australian households generally have a positive attitude to new technologies. At September 2001, an estimated 67% of Australian households owned or leased a personal computer, placing Australia in the top five nations in the world for use of this technology. 49% of households reported being connected to the internet via a home computer. For Australian farms, at June 2000, 58% of the 146,371 Australian farms used a computer. 34% used the internet.

In the 2002 WJN survey, over half the women (62.3%) responding to the survey had used the internet and the World Wide Web. The responses demonstrate development over the period since the commencement of the WJN of internet and computer awareness, as well as general positive attitudes towards the use of computers. The WJN profile is comparable to the Australian profile in the 2001 ABS survey.

Although women in the 2002 survey demonstrated favourable attitudes towards computers, an interesting point is made that increased awareness and use of technology does not necessarily mean people will be more willing to use technology e.g. videoconferencing. Where negative experiences occur due to quality or reliability issues, a more critical attitude can develop. Idealistic expectations become tempered when there is a better understanding of the technology and its limitations.

Although Legal Aid Queensland had established a videoconferencing network in South-West Queensland with the Women's Justice Network and in Central-West Queensland, with the Western Queensland Justice Network, the establishment of a statewide network was not achievable. Funds had become available for the WJN and WQJN for telecommunications infrastructure and the installation of hardware in communities. In the absence of funding to expand further, a different approach has had to be taken. Community consultation had always been important, but needed to be taken further in a defined strategy. A Rural and Regional Strategy has been developed to meet this need.

### Rural and Regional Strategy

A cornerstone of the Rural and Regional Strategy has been the realisation that Legal Aid Queensland cannot just be a provider, but has to take the role of a coordinator of legal services around the state. Hence, extensive consultation has occurred at the regional level to identify those entities with which partnership arrangements i.e. community access points, could be developed. In developing a community access point, account has been taken of the following:

- The actual need in the community and other services available;
- The capacity of the community to properly maintain the community access point;
- The capacity of Legal Aid Queensland to maintain the relationship, in terms of written material, training, follow-up and support.

To date, 27 Community Access Points have been established across Queensland. A Community Access Point is defined as an organisation:

- in a community which provides a range of support services;

- which has current information about the services Legal Aid Queensland provides;
- which is in regular contact with Legal Aid Queensland; and
- which will assist people to access legal advice.

Community Access Points have a folder of Legal Aid Queensland's fact sheets and publications, some have internet access, others videoconferencing.

Community Access Points provide:

- Information about services provided by Legal Aid Queensland including Legal Aid Queensland's fact sheets and self-help kits;
- Links to free telephone legal advice;
- Feedback to Legal Aid Queensland about local needs and opportunities to provide community legal education.

Legal Aid Queensland has received funding for a project "Prison Visits Via Videoconferencing". The aim of the project is to enable rural and regional families who have a family member in prison to be able to visit them regularly using videoconferencing. It is anticipated that the project will lead to the development of guidelines for videoconferencing visits in correctional centres and increased usage of videoconferencing for legal advice work. A particular emphasis will be on providing services to Indigenous communities in remote parts of Queensland. The Department of Correctional Services is supporting the thrust of the project.

### Lessons Learned

Knowledge gained from the development of two PC videoconferencing networks and the establishment of community access points can be summarised as follows:

1. Services provided should seek to be personalised. There is a preference for face-to-face services.
2. There is an extreme sensitivity to the issue of confidentiality in rural communities. The converse side of having a sense of belonging to a community is that gossip is rife and people are wary about their private business becoming public knowledge.
3. Time is an important factor in raising community awareness and uptake of new services. Before accessing a new service, people tend to wait to hear the opinion of others who have used the service. The reputation of the service is an important factor in its uptake, but it takes time to build the reputation because such news spreads slowly via word of mouth. This is especially so in the case of services which relate to very sensitive aspects of personal life such as legal and financial services.

4. There needs to be an investment in “soft” technologies to support the “hard” technical infrastructure. There needs to be a continuing high level of energy devoted to training and the nurturing of relationships with rural communities by liaison, networking and negotiation of partnerships.
5. A positive attitude to technology exists in rural Australia. However, factors such as cost, updating costs and where equipment is located can impact upon the success of any project.
6. Where community agencies are used, the coordinator’s attitude and skill level is of utmost importance. Persistence and energy often needs to be demonstrated in overcoming the limitations of the technology.

When it comes to videoconferencing, picture quality issues can be resolved, but is reliant on investment in bandwidth and equipment. At present, few organisations have the financial capacity or motivation to advance in this respect. A possible solution is the development of “community hubs” in regional communities, with different agencies partnering and sharing the technology resources. Such sites could be used by justice agencies and thus reduce the tremendous infrastructure costs.

### Community Education

Videoconferencing is increasingly being used for community education. A good example is the Women’s Legal Aid International Women’s Day Broadcast which went out to 34 rural and regional sites over two weeks. Over 80% of the sites accessed had never previously received community education training from Legal Aid Queensland before. While community education via videoconferencing is not inexpensive, its advantage is access to isolated and remote sites which would normally not receive this form of service. It does, though, require a high degree of administration and technical support assistance in order to operate.

### Future

Our view is that in order to not only continue the current level of videoconferencing service, but also to look to expand it, three developments need to occur:

1. Development of a booking system for such matters as rooms, equipment and appointments. A booking system is currently in place on our website, but we are working to improve it.
2. Development of protocols for usage. While we seek to avoid red tape, it is apparent to operate a network there needs to be documentation of who pays and in what circumstances, how accounts are issued, who links in, who books and who organises.
3. Information needs to be available on sites and their equipment.

Our overall approach is to move forward with pilot projects, building on our knowledge and thus increasing overall awareness and usage. We have taken a leadership role to date, but limited finances indicate there is a role for other Departments to take the issue further.

The private legal profession has also a role in being a community leader in the use of technology. An obvious avenue is building the use of videoconferencing into their legal practice as a feature of improved service delivery. This is happening in some locations already.

From the experience we have had with the use of technology in providing legal aid services we have reached some conclusions on likely future direction.

While the evaluations say that face-to-face is the preferred method for legal advice, the telephone will increasingly be used as the first point of contact. Videoconferencing will be accessed where community access points utilise the booking system and also for the legal advice program to prisons. Advice provided to prisons via videoconferencing is efficient. Our lawyers can access the databases in the course of the appointment, reducing repeat contacts. The project currently underway through Networking the Nation for family visits to prisons will develop videoconferencing knowledge in prisons and lead to the establishment of protocols for legal advice to prisoners using videoconferencing.

Community access points will be encouraged to continue with PC videoconferencing and be supported by ongoing training. Encouragingly, Indigenous communities have clearly demonstrated an enthusiasm towards using videoconferencing to access legal advice. The family visits project should assist to maintain this enthusiasm.

The courts are interested in using technology, but are hampered by lack of financial and infrastructure resources.

In summary, there have been two key factors here.

Legal Aid Queensland has aimed not just to be a direct provider of services but to use technology to provide systems that assist other agencies/communities to provide legal assistance and referral themselves, thus multiplying our reach in rural and regional communities.

And we have taken the approach of using technology to provide a range of entry points to our services - to meet a range of different circumstances.

Legal information by phone - fast, cheap and convenient for users - highly appropriate for less complex issues.

Free telephone advice speaking to a solicitor - ideal for providing urgent advice particularly for those in rural and regional areas.

Our website of extensive legal information - currently used more widely by community access points and other agencies assisting clients.

Videoconferencing - where a more personal service is needed, but traveling to see a solicitor is not possible.

Electronic lodgment of applications for legal aid - a system that submits an application for aid from private solicitors Statewide to head office in minutes.

So for us, technology has assisted us to enhance our service provision to remote communities by providing speed, convenience and choice.

Our experience clearly shows there is a place for technology in the provision of legal services, particularly in a state like Queensland where access to services is challenged by distance. Our investment and persistence with technology has begun to reap awards in improved efficiencies and providing better access to services for those in rural and remote communities. When it comes to harnessing technology to improve service delivery, I believe there is no turning back. Technology will continue to improve and offer new and unique ways for us to offer our assistance to clients. The challenge for us is keeping up with the pace.

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